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ABSTRACT

A continuing longitudinal study examined students' perceptions of their learning and motivation in a whole language classroom setting. Subjects, 14 fifth- or sixth-grade students who collaborated in the inquiry as co-researchers, were interviewed in depth. The mixed fifth- and sixth-grade classroom at the "Willow School" in southern California represented the school's diversity. Students were actively engaged in an integrated, thematic, "real world" curriculum. The classroom buzzed with readers and writers who shared the teacher's contagious sense of excitement about learning. In using literacy activities for self-expression, students experienced a direct connection between their learning activities and who they are, how they think, and what they care about. The richness of experience promoted by the curriculum nurtured students' thinking and feeling, moving them to express themselves and to be engaged in the literacy process. Students said that having choice was one of the main reasons they felt so motivated to learn. The students appreciated the teacher's enthusiasm, humor, and fun-loving presence. Findings suggest questions and answers for teachers to use in considering how their classrooms might honor students' voices more fully. This classroom provides one model of how teachers can share control and responsibility with their students. (Contains 22 references.) (RS)

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Students' Perspectives on Motivating Experiences in Literacy Learning

Penny Oldfather

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Summer 1993

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The National Reading Research Center (NRRC) is funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement of the U.S. Department of Education to conduct research on reading and reading instruction. The NRRC is operated by a consortium of the University of Georgia and the University of Maryland College Park in collaboration with researchers at several institutions nationwide.

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National Reading Research Center
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Students' Perspectives on Motivating Experiences in Literacy Learning

Penny Oldfather
University of Georgia

Students have much to teach us about how to create motivating classrooms. For example, Abigail, a fifth grader, provided insight into the importance of choice to her motivation for literacy when she explained that "What you want to know is usually funner stuff." This perspective presents a portrait of one exemplary whole language classroom, as seen through the eyes of Abigail and her classmates. This portrait is based on research findings from an eight-month ethnographic study of students' perceptions of their learning and motivation. The findings described in this perspective are based on data from observation fieldnotes and a series of 41 open-ended in-depth transcribed interviews with fourteen students who collaborated in this inquiry as co-researchers (Oldfather, 1991; 1993; in press). At this writing, the students are in high school, and are continuing in their fifth year as co-researchers in our longitudinal study (Oldfather & McLaughlin, in press).

These students' motivation for literacy was connected to two key, interacting elements in the classroom. The first was an emphasis on students' construction of what Sally Thomas, the classroom teacher, referred to as the "rich broth of meaning" that permeated the curriculum. The second was the deep responsiveness of the classroom culture to students' written, oral, and artistic expression. I have called this condition of deep responsiveness *Honored Voice* (Oldfather, 1991; Oldfather & McLaughlin, in press).

The concept of voice encompasses not only the expression of thought, but the development of thought, and the development of a sense of agency (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982; Shor & Freire, 1987). The processes of reading, writing, and speaking can be an integral part of students' self-discovery and empowerment as they construct new meanings and encounter new ways of knowing. In a classroom that honored their voices, students were empowered. In making many choices about what to learn and how to learn, they became personally invested in their literacy activities.

The scope of this article does not allow full elaboration of the whole language processes and activities that facilitated honored voice. Further information about whole language can

be found elsewhere: for example, in the work of Atwell (1987, 1990), Calkins (1991), Hornsby, Sukarna, and Parry (1986), Hansen, Newkirk, and Graves (1985), Routman (1988, 1991), and Harste and Burke (1988).

THE CLASSROOM CONTEXT

At "Willow School" in Southern California, students had a sense that their school was a special place to learn and that being there made a difference in their lives. As Paul, a sixth-grade student, commented: "Once you've dipped in, you can't get it off. Once you're in a school like this with that good philosophy and you have my teacher, you can't [go back to] a regular school."

About 30% of the students at Willow School were from African American, Mexican American, or Asian American backgrounds. The school was situated in an academic community, and a few students were children of college professors. The district had open enrollment, allowing parents and children to choose which elementary school the children would attend. About half of the students attending Willow came from neighborhoods outside the school's regular attendance area. Most classes in the school were intentionally structured to include multi-grade and multi-age levels.

The students who are my co-researchers were "dipped into" Sally Thomas's fifth- and sixth-grade classroom. Sally's classroom represented the school's diversity. Almost a third of Sally's students were eligible for special services through the resource teacher, ESL program, or speech and language clinicians. Sally's students' strengths, not their problems, were emphasized. Many students at Willow perceived working with the resource specialist as an honor, rather than as an indication of a problem or deficit. As one student commented, "You have to pass a special test to try to go there."

In Sally's classroom, students' desks were arranged in groups of 4 or 5, to allow small group work. There were plants around the room and a guinea pig and white rats in cages. Shel Silverstein's (1974) poem "Invitation" had been copied by hand on a large poster and was prominently displayed near the classroom door, betokening Sally's welcoming of students' imagination and dreams. The room was full of students' illustrated poems, stories written on the computer and placed in hand-made illustrated books, and art projects in a variety of media. There were hundreds of carefully chosen books, many relating to the thematic units being studied.

Students were actively engaged in an integrated thematic "real world" curriculum. They read self-selected books and they shared books. They kept dialogue journals and reading logs. They wrote avidly in a variety of genres during writing workshop and in all subject areas throughout the day. Students published some of their work through Willow's schoolwide publishing house. No grades were given; report cards were in narrative form.

A RESPECTFUL, RESPONSIVE CLASSROOM CULTURE

Sally's classroom buzzed with readers and writers who shared her contagious sense of

excitement about learning. Paul, a sixth grader, described his school:

> Students at Willow are different. Instead of not wanting to read, they'll read. Instead of not wanting to write, they'll write. They want to write. One of the things I love in school is that we're trying to learn — not just get the right answer. That's really good. You want to get the right answer but you still learn. You do better because learning is more important than getting the right answer.

Paul's comment reflects his insight about the motivating difference between real understanding and mechanical recitation or rote memorization (Kamii, 1985).

In keeping with her emphasis on making sense of things, Sally modeled respect for students' answers and interpretations. She encouraged students to admit freely "I don't understand this yet" or "I understand this differently." She looked beyond students' answers to find out what they really understood. In making it safe for students to share their thoughts, Sally had better access to their thinking processes, which enabled her to respond more fully to them and to scaffold or facilitate their growing understandings (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976).

The students' excitement about expressing themselves through writing was evident as they described how their writing extended beyond the school. Abigail described her love of writing as follows: "I write at home, and I write on vacation, and I write at school, and I write a lot of places. Everywhere I go, I just write!" John said that he wrote "all the way across the United States" when his family went to Arkansas. Nicki found that "if you're writing something and you really like it, you always want to do it." Brian reported, "I've taken my story home a couple of times . . . because I'm so caught up in it. When you have to stop you just say, 'No, I don't want to stop!' So I take it home and work on it there." Writing was the favorite school activity of most of the students. Their engagement in literacy activities was important, not only in terms of their love of learning, but also because that engagement enhanced the quality of their learning, which in turn intensified their motivation.

How did all this enthusiasm come about? What were the ingredients that increased students' motivation for literacy learning? As indicated previously, the keys were a deep responsiveness to students' self-expression — to their ideas, opinions, feelings, needs, interests, hopes, and dreams — and an emphasis on the students' construction of meaning. In short, this learner-centered classroom honored students' voices and emphasized students' making sense of things together. In the following sections I use the co-researchers' comments to illustrate the motivating power of self-expression, the motivating power of a rich broth of meaning, the motivating power of choice, and the motivating power of the responsive teacher. Finally, I provide questions and suggestions for teachers to use in considering how their classrooms might honor students' voices more fully. I conclude with a summarizing discussion of motivation as empowerment.

THE MOTIVATING POWER OF SELF-EXPRESSION

The co-researchers described how important it was to their motivation to be able to express themselves. A key connection between motivation for literacy and students' self-expression is this: In using literacy activities for self-expression, students experience a direct connection between their learning activities and *who* they are, *how* they think, and *what* they care about. These expressive activities are, therefore, powerfully motivating experiences. The students expressed themselves through their writing, in response to what they read, in small group discussions and projects, and through drama, music, and the visual arts. Abigail explained why the expressive activities were so motivating:

> ***Penny:*** Why is writing your favorite [activity]?
>
> ***Abigail:*** It's fun. It's fun to write because you have all these ideas and stuff about what to write. If you don't write, you just sort of don't do anything — and it's kind of boring. Everything else is kind of boring.

The following dialogue with Nicki about story writing is interesting, not only because it illustrates her intense and motivating experience in expressing herself through writing, but also because it shows her insight about her writing processes: [Nicki had shared a story she had written.]

> ***Penny:*** Can you remember how you felt in writing your story?
>
> ***Nicki:*** At the beginning it captured a lot of confusion and frustration. It was kind of a matter of teasing it out. Some people plan writing and make a chart and work it out ahead of time. I wrote this story as it came to me. If [the character] was doing [a certain thing] then I felt how he was feeling, and knew what would be coming next. For me, if you have an idea, it's not really hard. I was really excited about working on it. I took it home sometimes, to write. Sometimes I wrote lots, lots, lots. Other times I had to stop and think.
>
> ***Penny:*** How did you feel about the writing when you had to stop and think?
>
> ***Nicki:*** When you stop and think, sometimes you really go blank. You want to start writing but you don't know what to put. Sometimes the very words come into your head. Sometimes just the idea, and then you have to find the words.
>
> ***Penny:*** How do you decide what to write next?
>
> ***Nicki:*** It depends on the feelings the character is getting.
>
> ***Penny:*** You can feel the feelings of the characters?
>
> ***Nicki:*** Sometimes a good writer communicates with the characters in the story, like looking sad or greedy or confused. — [You] get a picture — like it's running through you. You're so scared you

> kind of feel like crying. You kind of get — the vision looks up to you. You almost get that same feeling. It goes through you and down to the page.

Nicki's writing was a deeply engaging act involving self-expression. Her engagement with writing came about through writing workshop (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1991; Rief, 1992), in which there were no deadlines or topics provided for her. Nicki and her classmates experienced a high degree of ownership of their writing. They read and responded to what others wrote, revealing to each other who they were, how they felt, and what they cared about. Sally read and responded to the students' writing, and her responses offered personal, specific, and authentic feedback to them. She posed questions and sought clarification, with the goal of understanding and scaffolding their thinking, while showing a constant respect for their ideas.

One powerful vehicle for verbal self-expression was what became known in Sally's class as "big discussions." Big discussions were intense student-centered interactions involving the entire class. Often related to the current thematic units, they addressed important and usually controversial real world issues of concern to students. Big discussions varied in length, and sometimes extended into subsequent days. The interactions often began with some degree of teacher direction or facilitation, but quickly became student-centered. Sally sometimes took a seat in the back of the room. Students would then be fully in charge, listening, expressing their opinions, and debating with each other.

During some big discussions, students moved about the room, clustering in smaller groups for intense consideration of the day's issue. Students reported that this physical freedom was important to the success of the discussions. Adults may see the value of such freedom of movement if they remember the contrasting degrees of engagement that occur in a free-flowing dialogue compared to one in which a group sits in circle (perhaps balancing plates and cups), politely listening to one comment at a time.

One series of big discussions emerged from a comparative investigation of folk and fairy tales across several cultures and incorporated then current censorship issues in California surrounding the Holt *Impressions* reading series (Booth, Booth, Pauli, & Phoenix, 1989). The students considered and critiqued Bruno Bettelheim's (1976) defense of fairy tales. They investigated parent and community opinions on the issue of whether the series should be banned because of the inclusion of fairy tales that some considered inappropriate. As a result of this discussion and investigation, Abigail wrote a letter to the editor of the *Los Angeles Times* (Oldfather et al., 1991, p. 141):

> Dear Censors: I have heard about banning fairy tales and I don't like it! These parents think that it is lying to children, and [will] make them believe black magic, but it's not. Fairy tales are part of growing up and learning how to cope with real life, and it's also our imagination. If they get away with banning fairy tales children are going to be boring. Also, fairy tales are everywhere.

> The only way to get rid of fairy tales is for kids to stare at a blank wall. And still they'll get away with imagining. No matter what you do, fairy tales will live forever. And if fairy tales are gone, there won't be such a thing as a kid anymore.
> (Signed) Abigail, Disagreeing young reader

One big discussion connected to the fairy tale considerations revolved around issues of truth in fiction, in which the students concluded that "happily ever after" can be a lie and that "there really are Big Bad Wolves who can be overcome."

Paul described how Sally invited students' ideas and facilitated the development of their thinking through these big discussions.

> What she does is, she lets all of us talk. She says, if you have any ideas or — well, most teachers say, "If you have any ideas raise your hand." Mrs. Thomas will start us to say stuff. She'll give us examples or give us ideas and then we build off of those ideas and say our ideas, final ideas. I don't think this is really a final idea because every time you think about something and then you think about something else for it and then you think that's your thought but then there's something else about that. . . . You can express yourself.

Paul's comments describe Sally's constructivist style of teaching. She offered ideas and stimulated students' thinking, using, for example, literature, current events, and challenging questions, and then she invited them to collaborate in figuring things out. Paul experienced the open-endedness of this process in which "knowing" was developed together and in which there was more than one valid or "final" idea. Paul's example illustrates how honoring students' voices enhanced the development of their thought, and created the "rich broth of meaning" that promoted students' motivation for literacy. Nicki also valued big discussions:

> *Nicki:* And I love it when we have big discussions, 'cause I know if you're on a different side you can see the opinions of the other side and maybe learn to accept that they have a point there or something. But that's neat to listen to the other side and I know I convinced a lot of people about what I believed in. . . . [Teachers at Willow] feel it's very important to know the opinions of other people and not try to teach them opinions to think of because you can't teach an opinion. It's important that you know how other kids feel and their opinions.

In modeling respect for students' opinions, in honoring their voices, Sally enabled students to honor the voices of their classmates. In this way, honored voice became a condition of student-student interaction as well as teacher-student interaction.

Students valued opportunities to express their feelings as well as ideas. In the following example, Florencia speaks clearly about the connection between the expression of feelings and her motivation. She identified a hierarchy of feeling which she used for determining which were her favorite school subjects. Florencia reported that she enjoyed writing, math, and reading, but that she liked writing the most. I asked her to explain why:

> Well, I can express my feelings. In reading a book, the feelings are already there, and you get to read the feelings of the author. In math there isn't very much feeling. And in writing you get to express <u>your</u> feelings. I just enjoy the writing the most, because sometimes I can really get what's in my mind.

Self-expression also occurred through art activities, which were often connected to students' poetry reading and writing. Through experiences that integrated the arts with literacy activities, the students found additional pathways for self-expression that introduced affective and aesthetic qualities into their literacy engagement, and enhanced motivation for literacy learning. Following are examples from two students who described how they liked to express themselves through their art.

> ***Marcel:*** Art is like also like writing because art — you make yourself. Like you just close your eyes and think of something to draw and then just paint it. It's like painting your mind. Just — you paint what you like.
>
> ***Penny:*** You are a poet.
>
> ***Marcel:*** Painting your mind is . . . it doesn't have to look like anything. You can just paint something black, and just lines, or some weird stuff.
>
> ***Penny:*** How is that valuable?
>
> ***Marcel:*** Sometimes if you feel really clammed up or something, and really don't feel that good, just paint what you want.
>
> ***Penny:*** Is that an important thing in school, do you think?
>
> ***Marcel:*** They should have some painting, because they shouldn't always say paint this and this. Some people don't think of painting as an art; they think of it as a subject. You have to get real good at it. Sometimes you should just paint whatever you want.

John had stated that art was important to him, and I asked him to elaborate:

> ***Penny:*** Art is important to you personally because . . .
>
> ***John:*** It makes me feel good. It makes me let everything out that I feel. If I feel bad I can do something fierce. If I feel good I can do something like mountains and clouds and someone walking around on the hillside. Or something like that. But I can just do what I feel. And that's what I usually do.

These examples illustrate how students' literacy learning permeated various areas of the curriculum and how deeply connected students felt to literacy activities when they involved self-expression. Students expressed themselves freely in this classroom because of several interacting elements. First, the teacher (and other students) invited, listened to, and responded authentically to what students expressed through discussions, their writing,

and through the arts. Second, the teacher emphasized making sense of things, rather than just getting the right answer, deeply respecting the thinking of each student and creating an environment in which students felt safe enough to risk expressing ideas and feelings that were important to them. As a result, the rich broth of meaning developed through an integrated thematic curriculum which provided personally relevant food for thought, nurtured and supported students' thinking processes, and stimulated them to want to express their ideas and feelings. The next section will focus on this rich broth of meaning.

THE MOTIVATING POWER OF A "RICH BROTH OF MEANING"

The richness of experience promoted by the curriculum in Sally Thomas's classroom nurtured students' thinking and feeling, moving them to express themselves and to therefore be engaged in literacy processes. In this setting, emphasis was placed not so much on meanings valued by a textbook author or even by the teacher but on the students' own constructions of meaning. Sally described her philosophy:

> Ultimately, it's meaning that counts — your meaning. The ultimate value in what you're doing is in the meaning of it, which is really unrelated to the skills part . . . except the skills support the meaning. And they support being able to access it.
>
> But there are lots of ways, especially in our world now, to access meaning. Dancers access it one way and musicians access it another. So I really think that children need to value themselves as individuals, with their own strengths, and understand that there's not just one way to be successful or to get at anything. You can get at anything through anything else. So we've got to find those paths. Language is a powerful tool and so it's really extra important to me. A story accesses emotions and feelings. It creates a life. It creates a pathway emotionally to get into meaning.

Because students felt this emphasis on personal meaning, they wanted to understand things. Paul's view of the importance of this emphasis for his motivation was reflected in his comment that "You do better because learning is more important than getting the right answer."

A large part of the curriculum throughout the school was based on thematic units, often negotiated with students, that served as a means of developing the rich broth of meaning. Examples of themes in Sally's class were "Across Generations," "Quest Fantasies," "Ecology and Technology," and "With What You Have" (a unit about building on strengths to overcome problems, such as oppression, prejudice, poverty, and handicaps).

Thematic units allowed students to pursue depth in their learning. Textbooks were used only occasionally, as additional resources. Abigail contrasted textbook learning with the depth that she gained from reading *National Geographic*:

> ***Abigail:*** In the textbook they just have plain facts. Nothing that you can find out in *National Geographic*. They have archaeologists' spots where they last been,

> and stuff. And what they found. And in textbooks, they just have boring stuff like the names of people and what they did for the last fifteen years or something. And it's really kind of real boring. And in the *National Geographic*, they tell the person and what they found. And they take pictures of what it was and how they did it, what years it was from, and not just how many years they have been working or something. They show things that you more likely want to know, than what you have to know.

Andrew described his experience in conducting an interview with a person from China who was living in the community:

> ***Andrew:*** It was a lot of fun to interview somebody. I sort of liked the idea that you had to keep on probing, going deeper and asking questions.
>
> ***Penny:*** What is it about probing that makes it interesting to you?
>
> ***Andrew:*** I don't know. It's sort of fun to find out the real truth.

The meaningfulness of the curriculum was enriched by many resources for inquiry: trade books, reference materials, newspapers, phone books, computer programs, and places (e.g., local museums, folk music collections, libraries, and college computer labs), as well as interesting people in the community. Students learned and shared what they learned through many different kinds of projects, such as writing and publishing stories and poems; songs; graphic arts; submitting letters to the editors of newspapers; and producing choral readings, original plays, and newscasts.

A key aspect of classroom inquiry was finding the connections among the various substantive themes, which were developed with flexibility for the needs of the students. Sally described in an interview how some of the units developed during the year.

> I'm constantly looking, when I design these thematic units, for what kinds of writing, what kinds of reading will really get them a rich meaning broth. You have to be flexible enough to follow if the students are needing something different.
>
> You think through what you're going to do . . . and the thing that amazes me is that it always fits. For example, I did that whole light unit. We started with color and the Lawrence Hall of Science unit, and then we got into all different parts of light. And then I was going to do optical illusions.
>
> I had been concerned because there were a few students who were being mean to each other in class. We were able to connect the study of optical illusions with the study of stereotyping. They learned how your eye sees upside down but your brain automatically turns it over. So then we're going to try to transfer that to our social stereotypes. So we were going from optical illusions to stereotypes to the whole notion that the brain searches for patterns. And [the brain] processes in terms of what it expects to see, and in patterns that it is familiar with. I'll be really interested to see in another month what these students are

going to understand. They never cease to amaze me.

Sally reported that in the culmination of these inquiries, many students were able to articulate in their own ways that we may understand light as particle or wave, depending on how we frame a question; that we may appreciate or unfairly stereotype people, depending on our mindsets.

The students enjoyed having their thinking challenged. For example, John described his pleasure in an assignment: "That was just the most interesting stuff. We got some really difficult questions that made me smile. It made me want to laugh. After a while you get used to it and it's really fun."

THE MOTIVATING POWER OF CHOICE

Students said that having choice was one of the main reasons they felt so motivated to learn. They were allowed many choices within the well-established structures and requirements of the classroom. Examples of students' choices included decisions about the order in which to complete required tasks, which books to read, particular goals for reading, topics or genres for writing, pacing during writing workshop, types of products for social studies projects, and whether to work alone or with friends. Although I did not ask them about it directly, most students brought choice into our interview dialogues about their motivation, as the following examples show:

Paul: Here at Willow you can kind of do what you want. Not exactly what you want, but you can kind of do what you want. Without that . . . What's life without choices? There's not a life without choices. And even if you're younger you should still have choices.

Marcel: Choice is very important. Like in reading, if I want to read, I'll be excited and do it. If I don't, I won't be interested and won't learn as much. Sometimes it's good to have assigned reading, like to help you find a new author or a new subject, like archaeology. But only you know the feeling you want to write about.

Nicki: If reading is something we all need to do, why not read something that we enjoy, so that later on we will want to read more and more! (Oldfather & Thomas, 1991, p. 118).

Marcel: If you want to learn something — it's fun. It's boring if you don't want to learn it. Ask the kids what they want to learn about. But the kids should be serious. They shouldn't get carried away and say "Oh yeah, I want to learn about something that's 'way out.'" But if it's really something serious that they really do want to learn about, you should give them a chance.

John provided a poignant illustration of the challenges of balancing students' need for choice with the requirements of the curriculum when he remarked: "I want to want to do a science project. But I can't want to do a science project if they say you have to do a science project." Although John did not have choice about whether to do a science project in

Sally's classroom, he did have choice about what kind of project to do and how he would share what he had learned.

Abigail summed up why choice helped promote her motivation:

> What you want to know is usually funner stuff. Most kids think [archaeology] is really boring. But I think it's really fun. You kind of don't need to know it, unless you're gonna be an archaeologist or something. But I need to know it, because I want to be an archaeologist. And I want to know it. At school sometimes they make you have to do it all, but . . . they don't really tell you what you want to know. They just kind of give you an idea about what there is to know.

Abigail's statement expresses how having choices about learning helps her pursue personally relevant reading about interesting topics. Her comments also identify the challenge of developing a curriculum that is more than a survey, a curriculum that gets into enough depth to make learning interesting.

Students especially valued having choice about the pacing of their work. Reading and writing workshops provided a flexible structure that enabled students to set their own goals, as Nicki indicated when speaking to an audience at the Claremont Reading Conference:

> *Nicki:* The famous phrase given [by Mrs. Thomas] . . . when we ask "How long does it have to be?" is "As long as your imagination will take you." Choices like this encourage us to write. When we're given a specific length, we feel pressured — pressured to meet a deadline. Or perhaps we feel as though we have a mental block, and we just don't know what to write. By telling us that we can make a paper as long or as short as we want, we get a less pressured feeling, which, believe it or not, leads us to write the longest paper we ever wrote (Oldfather & Thomas, 1991, p. 118).

Josh appreciated the pacing in the classroom: "She doesn't say, 'Zoom, you have to do this in five minutes or else!' She's not like that. She's moderate. She gives us enough time, but not too much time."

THE MOTIVATING POWER OF THE RESPONSIVE TEACHER

The students had much to say about their teacher. They appreciated Sally's enthusiasm, humor, and fun-loving presence. They said that the most important attributes of a motivating teacher were caring, understanding, trusting, and respecting students' ideas, opinions, and feelings. They also believed it was important for a teacher to hold high expectations, to explain things — but to avoid telling all the answers. For example, Lauren commented on how Sally allowed the students to assume responsibility.

> *Lauren:* Mrs. Thomas makes it fun for the kids. She lets us participate, and she lets us tell the answers. She doesn't tell all the answers. She knows that she's not perfect.

Lauren's observation that "She knows that she's not perfect" was offered as a high compliment and reflected Sally's authenticity with the students. She openly shared her

feelings in many ways: sharing her processes as an author and her concerns about the problems and issues in the real world, sharing her passions about books (she cried in the sad parts), sharing her struggles to figure out how to help students with a particular concept or skill, and sharing her concerns for students when interpersonal issues arose in the classroom. This personal quality of Sally Thomas's teaching style and the openness of her self-expression were very important in establishing a responsive and nurturing classroom climate that enabled students to express their feelings and ideas so fully.

> ***Nicki:*** Mrs. Thomas is really understanding.
>
> ***Penny:*** Understanding of what?
>
> ***Nicki:*** Understanding your feelings about what you're writing. Or understanding what you're doing. Or why you don't understand it. And not thinking that you're a dummy or something. Helping you. Really helpful and cooperating.

The mutual respect between teacher and students was reflected in Lily's words:

> She has this chime, and instead of screaming her head off for everybody to be quiet or clapping her hands, she has this chime which is real pretty. . . . She mainly has everything under control because everybody respects her because she's a good teacher and she cares.

TRANSLATING HONORED VOICE TO CLASSROOM PRACTICE

A teacher might respond to the ideas presented thus far by saying "I would like to provide more choices, to emphasize students' construction of meaning, and to honor their voices, but how can this be translated into practice in my classroom?" How can I allow students choice when they may not have perspective on what they need to know? What about the requirements of the curriculum? The challenge is to achieve a comfortable balance between choice and structure that takes into account the needs and interests of students, teachers' personal styles, and comfort levels for sharing control and responsibility with students.

Responsive teachers do not relinquish power; they share power and responsibility, providing a continually evolving balance between choice and structure. They negotiate with students when appropriate; they provide ground rules; and they make clear what the "givens" are and what students' options are within those givens. Students may feel that being able to make even small decisions (e.g., when to use the restroom or sharpen a pencil) are important indicators of their self-determination in the classroom.

Teachers who wish to offer their students more choices could start by experimenting in small ways, in limited time periods, or in only certain areas of the curriculum. Making too many changes at once might be difficult and discouraging for teachers. Gradual experimentation allows teachers a more comfortable means of working toward change.

. Teachers may begin by assessing what they are already doing in their classrooms to honor students' voices. Next, they may wish to identify approaches that would suit their particular classroom. The following groups of questions may serve as guides in this effort:

(1) How might I invite students to express themselves more fully? Do students feel they can express their ideas, feelings, opinions, and needs without fear of criticism? Do I offer opportunities throughout the day for written, oral, and artistic expression in relation to all areas of the curriculum? Do I pose open-ended questions, communicating that many different possibilities can be considered and that my opinion is not the only valid one? Do I provide for wait time, and do I structure discussions to promote open participation? Do I allow some freedom of movement to enable students to communicate with each other? Do I structure the reading and writing workshops to elicit students' thinking and ideas?

(2) How might I listen and respond to students more fully and encourage them to listen and respond to each other? Do I write thoughtful responses to students' journals, reading logs, and other writing? Do I fully communicate my interest in and respect for what they have to say? Do I structure many classroom activities that are student-centered, rather than teacher-centered (e.g., small group work, dyads), to allow me to give up the "conductor" role and to free me to give individual time and attention?

(3) How might I provide more opportunities to exhibit and otherwise make visible to others students' ideas and products? Do students have the opportunity to present their research findings to appropriate audiences? Can students publish their work in class books and magazines, submit letters to editors, or submit their writing to national publications? Are students' creative products mounted and hung for others to appreciate? Do I read students' stories and poems aloud to the class? Do I provide opportunities for students to present plays, skits, and improvisations? Are parents invited to school for special events?

(4) How might I provide students choices about what they will learn, how they will learn, and how their learning will be evaluated? Do students have a voice in establishing their own goals and topics for reading, writing, and inquiry in content areas? Do students participate in establishing criteria for product quality and self-evaluation? Do they have options for the types of products through which they share what they have learned with others? Do students have some choice in the pacing of their learning activities? Do they have some say about the order in which they do their assignments, within certain time blocks? Are students involved in the planning, problem solving, and organizational decision making of the classroom and the school? Do they have some choices about where to study and with whom to study? Do they have some opportunity for physical movement and some individual responsibility for their water and bathroom needs? Do I show students that I honor their voices by demonstrating a willingness not only to listen and negotiate, but also to act upon their ideas and suggestions when I feel that I can do so?

MOTIVATION AS EMPOWERMENT

Ultimately, issues of student motivation for literacy have to do with empowerment. For students to own their literacy learning, they need to feel that they have some say about what happens in their classrooms; they need to choose personally interesting and relevant books, projects, and writing topics; they need to know that their voices have been heard. Confronting issues of student empowerment requires educators to examine deeply held personal and professional beliefs about sharing control and responsibility with students.

Sally's classroom provides one model for how this might be done. Although Sally did not relinquish her power, she did share it. She balanced choice and structure. Her power came mainly through sharing power with her students. And they knew it.

Among the many simple but personal gifts presented to Sally on the last day of school were poems written by some of her students. On a shirt tie-dyed in soft pastels was a poem composed and handwritten by Paul, a graduating sixth grader:

The Seeds and the Sun

As the colors of the hill run up the horizon,
the sun creeps down, sneaking, hiding.
The wind mill turns and creaks from the wind that
blows and blows, never ending, never
beginning.

The moon wakes up, opens its eyes.
A tear runs down for it is happy it is starting.
The stars twinkle and shine, burning their last
breath of life.
The people marvel and wonder as it opens their
heart.

A teacher picks up her wand,
Implanting huge imaginations in young children.
She picks only the plump to be in her wondrous
class.
Then a miraculous magical beam of new light
breaks the barrier.

Another tear runs down the cheek of the moon for
it has come to an end.
As the colors of the hill tumble down the horizon.

Thanks, Mrs. Thomas.
We were the seeds and you were the sun.

Paul
June, 1990

Paul's metaphor of the students as seeds and the teacher as sun captured the dynamics in this classroom where motivation for literacy learning was carefully nurtured. The focus was on the power of the seeds rather than on the power of the sun. The seeds contained all the impulses for growth and development. The sun shared her power and warmth. The seeds realized their potential.

Author Notes. The name of the school is a pseudonym. The teacher's full name is used, and the co-researchers' first names are used, at their request and with parental and school district approval.

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